The spirit, ethos and DNA of AI – A Practitioner's Reflection

By: David Shaked

Writing about the spirit or DNA building blocks of AI can be a challenge. Each AI practitioner or enthusiast I asked invariably highlighted what was most meaningful for them and their practice of AI. Every conversation with my colleagues and every question I have asked has helped expand, enrich and further crystallise my thoughts. This journey of exploration in itself has been a great example of the power of positive social construction of reality. This article is my attempt to summarise my own insights about what is in fact the positive core of AI.

AI is comprised of a few key elements. Most practitioners I spoke to highlighted the five original principles of AI as the fundamental DNA building blocks of the approach. These principles include:

1) Social constructionist – what we believe to be real in the world is created through our own filters (both conscious and unconscious) and through conversations with others. The images we hold, the words we use, the questions we ask and the conversations we hold form and continue to evolve our reality and create the world we see, experience and live in.

2) Positive – People and organisations are very aware of their failings and potential pit falls and tend to focus on these. They rarely think about their positive history, the things they have got right and their potential – altogether forming their positive core. All people, organizations and experiences have a positive core. Inquiring into and appreciating the positive core helps it expand further. Also, we are more likely to achieve a positive outcome if we approach the situation, however difficult, with a positive perspective.

3) Poetic – People and organisations have stories about high and low moments from the past and present as well as hopes and fears about the potential future. Stories can be told about any aspect of an individual's or an organization's existence. All stories can have multiple interpretations. We can choose which parts we will focus on and how we interpret them.

4) Anticipatory – Our images of the future are more powerful in shaping it than our actual plans. Conscious and subconscious choices are inspired in the present based on these images of the future. Developing and holding onto positive images of the future (rather than a future we wish to avoid or move away from) help create that positive future by opening a wider range of new possibilities for change and learning.

5) Simultaneity – Inquiry in itself generates change, rather than just being an exercise of data collection (to be analysed later). The first question we ask is fateful, in that the organization/person will turn their energy in the direction of the inquiry. As practitioners we must be aware of the power of inquiry to instantly affect the course of change.

Other AI principles have emerged and been added. They support and extend the DNA of AI. These emerging principles are:

1) Wholeness – Including the whole system and the whole of each person in a change process yields a much richer tapestry of strengths, resources and possibilities. When we seek and open ourselves to the whole story of a person, a situation or an organisation, we can bring out the best in people and the systems they create, and achieve faster and more innovative ways forward as well as have deeply well-informed decisions, plans and steps forward.

2) Enactment Principle – By acting in the present in ways that are consistent with our vision, we enact the future we wish to have. This also means that each of us is 'in charge' of taking steps to creating the future we want to have – not just our leaders or managers.

3) Free Choice Principle – People perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how, when and what they wish to contribute.

4) Awareness Principle – Raising the level of our self and our social awareness and making conscious choices to bring appreciative intent to our relationships enhance our experiences and help us move forward in many situations.

5) Narrative Principle – The stories we tell and listen to provide meaning and continuity in our lives. Stories help create deeper relationships and have a potential to transform our lives. When we have really listened to another person tell some part of their story, it changes our relationship. We remember an interesting and exciting story long after we have forgotten a complex explanation. By changing the sort of stories we ask to hear, we find transformative information which will help us create the path to the future we want.

All these principles together create the container of AI and guide our practice. But are they enough to guide us as we try to lead our lives more appreciatively, as we navigate specific situations with AI or as we think through specific interventions?

Another important element for me are the eight AI assumptions, which support and enhance the meaning of the AI principles. To me they also help explain the values that guide us in our AI work. They help us stretch our imaginations about the situations we face. If we can look at the principles as the 'brain of AI', then the assumptions would form the 'heart'. These assumptions are:

- In every society, organization, group or person something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.
- The act of asking questions of an organization or a group influences the group in some way.
- People will have more confidence and comfort to journey into the future (unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (known).
- If we carry forward parts of the past they should be the best parts.
- The language we use creates our reality.
- It is important to value differences.

So far I have covered what I described as the brain and heart of AI. In my view there are many other elements and practices worth keeping in mind which, as a whole, can be considered as the "spirit and body of AI".

I believe that the spirit that underlines the practice of AI creates a greater meaning to it. One that looks at 'being AI' rather than simply 'doing AI'. This is where the picture is likely to become unique to each individual practitioner, as it really depends on our preferences and own values. For me, the spirit of AI includes several beliefs I hold on to. For example:

1) I value and appreciate the power of inquiry – inquiry is my preferred way to enable change, rather than providing knowledge, training, feedback or advice.

2) I try to maintain an appreciative and open attitude. Marilee Adams' Choice Map is a useful guide that highlights the value of following the learner journey and its relevant choices rather than judger choices.

3) I believe that behind every complaint or a problem there is a wish for something else which could potentially enhance the road forward and enrich the vision of 'what could be'.

Therefore, I don't view these complaints as 'resistance'. All we need to do is to inquire appreciatively into them. What do the complainers and resistors tell us about what is wanted, or about what could make a situation even better?

4) I believe that each of us can change our future. This is a belief I hold for myself and one that I instil in those around me and in those I work with. We have the authority and personal power to create the change we want to have. We need to give ourselves greater permission and take responsibility for leading it.

5) I believe that people are an endless resource of great ideas, that they have the potential and unique resources to pursue them and that they can find their own way forward. As an AI practitioner, I remain curious about all of that and about what else is possible. What might come next? With that comes a belief in the process of emergence – people make decisions as they go and as they develop their view of the reality. I trust people with the decisions they make, which is a very powerful and liberating position to adopt.

6) Building on strengths is more effective than correcting weaknesses – having had years of experience seeking to understand, working with and changing the weaker parts of people and of organisations before starting with AI, I know and deeply believe that building on what we are good at and what we are proud of offers a superior way forward.

So we've covered the brain, heart and spirit of AI. To round it all off, there are several practices I follow in life and at work. For me these form the 'body of AI'. They are:

1) *A continuous and never ending search for 'what gives life'* or the positive core of every individual, group or organisation I come across. I actively seek and notice when people are more enthusiastic or fired up about something and I track where the energy is flowing. Affirming or inquiring into it helps it become more visible and propel the situation forward in new and more energising ways.

2) *Reframing issues/problems into possibilities*. When a problem is presented to me (or presents itself), I often wonder and regularly ask:
    a. What's good about this?
    b. Now that I know all of this, what would I like to do?
    c. What is possible here, now?
    d. What would we like to see instead?

   Having 'problems' is not a 'bad' situation: problems can be a rich source of solutions –with the help of a generative question.

3) *Co-creation of the future, generatively and continuously*. The best futures are co-designed and co-created by the people who will live in them. In my work and conversations with leaders and managers, I encourage them to move into more participative, inclusive and generative ways of creating visions and action plans.

4) *Listening to those I work with very deeply*. My preference for listening rather than talking helps me turn down the volume of my own ideas or advice and focus on the person(s) I am with. It enables me to hear their full story and very often find clues of generativity in what I'm hearing.

5) *Developing 'appreciative eyes'*. Over the years, I have developed my appreciative eyes. To me this means that I:
    a. Observe situations appreciatively – spotting what is working well, what is alive, what seems important or wanted, what strengths are visible etc.

b. Spotting potential generative topics for conversation and inquiry – this is immensely useful in being able to engage people in strength-based dialogue of change and positive action. It also provides ample possibilities to move forward even in the most difficult situations.

c. Taking time to reflect appreciatively – mindful reflection gives the opportunity and space for deeper insights to emerge.

d. Adopting a position of 'not knowing', having the curiosity and expectation for something useful and interesting to emerge. Each situation, however similar to a situation from the past, is unique. Taking the position of 'not knowing' liberates us to ask appreciative and generative questions, to notice possible ways forward and to spot micro-signs of progress that need to be affirmed.

e. Treating every situation as new means that I am always curious about what is possible in the situation at hand.

Of course, adopting these practices consistently can be a challenge and a continuous stretch. Sometimes I need to remind myself to follow them but most of the time they happen naturally.

In this article I've described the brain, heart, spirit and body of AI as I see it. It is based on my own journey with AI and on conversations with highly esteemed colleagues. I believe it is a good representation of the reality of 'doing and being AI'. This is not a definitive view of AI: it can't ever be. Other practitioners may have additional individual characteristics they use to describe their unique approach to AI and what it means to them. I am sure my learning journey with AI is by no means over and I remain curious about 'what else?'

Questions for reflections:

1) Whether you are new to AI or a seasoned practitioner – what did you feel a deep connection with in my description of spirit, ethos and DNA of AI? What resonated with you?

2) Which of the principles and/or assumptions do you feel most comfortable with? What stories can you share where these principles came to life?

3) Which principles and/or assumptions would you like to develop further or apply more regularly in your work with AI? How might you do it? In what ways could they enrich your AI experiences?

4) What values from the list above do you share? How do they (or can they) support your practice of AI? What other values do you hold that might support you?

5) Which of the practices I described do you already follow? Which ones would you like to adopt?

6) What other practices do you have that seem essential to your experience of AI?

7) What else has this article sparked for you?

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